A HISTORY OF THE PROGRESSIVE MINERS OF AMERICA, 1932-1940

BY

DALLAS M YOUNG
B.Ed., Southern Illinois State Normal University, 1936
A.M., University of Illinois, 1937

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN
HISTORY IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1940

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One of the most essential qualifications for a person who undertakes to study a labor controversy is that he remain free from prejudice and partisanship. Ideally, the fewer foregone conclusions he has formed the better. The person whose background is in no way related to the field in which the controversy occurs is greatly handicapped, however. He might be compared with the student who undertakes a highly specialized course without having learned the basic principles from a survey course. In each case the elementary terms must be mastered before much progress can be made. For a stranger unfamiliar with such terms as "pit-committeeman," "face-boss," "check-weighman," "trip-rider" and unfamiliar with the specialized atmosphere of a mining region, months or even years would be spent acquainting himself with the vocabulary and the psychology of a coal-mining camp. On the other hand, the student who has grown up among miners has acquired this familiarity without formal education. His problem, if he attempts to study a labor controversy, is to eliminate prejudice and sympathy for his people. This is even greater when the dispute occurs within the ranks of miners, as is true in the present rivalry between the United Mine Workers of America and the Progressive Miners of America.

The writer has been fortunate in obtaining a combination of these positions. A miner's son, he has tried to obtain a thorough understanding of mining life. More important is the fact that he has lived on both sides of a controversy within the ranks. On each side he has good friends whose opinions are exact opposites. He has listened to their talk, he has read what they have written, he has watched what they have done; and he has struggled to keep unbiased.

Having been permitted to spend several weeks working in the official records and files of the Progressive Miners of America, during 1936-1937 and again in 1939-1940, the writer has had access to the manuscript originals of all correspondence, reports, official notices, minutes of meetings, et cetera. Not once was a request for particular documents denied. It should be pointed out that copies of several pencil manuscripts were made in

1936-1937 and that those same originals had either been misplaced or lost by 1939-1940.

Official newspapers of the rival unions, the *United Mine Workers Journal,* United Mine Workers of America, and *The Progressive Miner,* Progressive Miners of America, were used for a study of the period from 1932 to 1940. Printed to expound their particular points of view, these publications are nevertheless very helpful and surprisingly accurate for official notices. Through their use, events were kept in a more chronological order than might otherwise have been possible. Such local Illinois newspapers as *The Daily American,* West Frankfort; the *Benton Evening News,* Benton; *The Daily Advocate* (now known as the *Belleville Daily Advocate*), Belleville; the *Illinois State Journal* and the *Illinois State Register,* Springfield, have been very valuable.

Numerous printed documents ranging from constitutions, minutes of conventions, and financial reports of the two riva' unions to judicial decisions and congressional investigations have been used.

* * * *

With the passing of the day when coal-mine operator and miner were one and the same, the need for organization among miners began to be felt. Almost a century ago, in the 1840's, one of the earliest unions made its appearance in the anthracite fields of eastern Pennsylvania. Little is known of the first union, named for its leader, John Bates, other than that a strike failed to bring improved conditions, that internal dissension developed, and that the body soon disappeared without having made much progress outside its local area. Since then there have been many such units: The American Miners' Association, the first national union of mine-workers in the United States, rose and fell to be succeeded by the Workingmen's Benevolent Association; the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers and the United States and Territories and National Trades Assembly No. 135, Knights of Labor, struggled for control before they finally, in 1890, realized the futility of such strife, joined ranks, and became the United Mine Workers of America.

So precarious was the early existence of the United Mine Workers of America that one wonders how it succeeded in living.

Scarcely a year passed without a strike failure. Having reached a new low in 1897, it apparently decided to risk everything on one strike, and, ironically enough, this proved to be the turning point for the union. The strike was won, new members came rapidly, and from then until 1922 the path of the U. M. W. of A. led upward, only to be followed by another decline. Within the past decade another union, the Progressive Miners of America, has made its appearance. Springing from the U. M. W. of A., it is now struggling with the parent organization for dominance in the mining area. It is this movement which has influenced the lives of at least 500,000 people in southern and central Illinois and which forms the basis for this study.

Personal rivalry has usually been a common thing among miners' officials. It was not surprising that two personalities like John L. Lewis, president of the International Union, U. M. W. of A., and Frank Farrington, president of District No. 12, U. M. W. of A., should clash. Farrington was popular among Illinois miners; Lewis was not. Were the state officials to manage the affairs of District No. 12 or was John L. Lewis to have control? Several times during the early twenties, it seemed that the break would come. In August, 1926, Farrington sailed for Europe, supposedly to unveil a memorial to Samuel Gompers (for years president of the American Federation of Labor), who had died in 1924. Lewis immediately exposed what he called Farrington's "sell-out" of the Illinois miners. He revealed to the executive board a letter written by Farrington to the Peabody Coal Company in which Farrington mentioned having signed a three-year contract at a salary of $25,000 annually. When this news was given to the miners, their opinions crystallized immediately against Farrington. Four years later in Springfield, Illinois, at a convention to reorganize the United Mine Workers of America, Farrington gave his belated explanation to the miners of Illinois. He said that he had foreseen that the miners in his district were going to have to take a reduction in wages as competition from other fields was too great, and yet he knew that should he advocate such a reduction, John L. Lewis would be the first to call him a traitor. With the Peabody Coal Company serving as intermediary, an agreement was reached whereby Farrington was to leave, Lewis was to accept the reduction in wages, the matter was to be dropped, and the threatened strike in the coal fields was to be averted. From that day until the

contract expired Farrington drew his salary at the first of each month without doing any work. Even today the exact relationship existing between Farrington, Lewis, and the Peabody Coal Company is by no means clear and undisputed. One can safely conclude that the division of Illinois miners into pro-Lewis and pro-Farrington factions was an initial step toward the rise of a new union.

According to the constitution of District No. 12, Illinois, U. M. W. of A., any new agreement drawn up by their representatives and those of the operators was to be submitted to a referendum vote of the miners. If the men voted favorably, the contract was to be signed and become effective immediately. Should the returns be unfavorable, the agreement was to be discarded and negotiations for another pact begun. Before the expiration of the 1928-1932 contract efforts to reach an agreement had failed. Almost all of the Illinois miners put down their tools on March 31, 1932. Numerous conferences were held during the ensuing three months, but not until July 9 was a new agreement announced. Whereas the previous contract had provided for a basic wage scale of six dollars and ten cents, this proposal offered five dollars. Both those who favored accepting the agreement and those who opposed it expounded their points of view. When the results of the first referendum were tabulated, the vote was 25,992 for to 10,241 against accepting the proposal.

Negotiations for another agreement were renewed immediately, and a second offer was announced on July 26. Essentially it was the same: The all-important wage scale still used five dollars as a base. Opposition was so strong that the high officials decided to conduct what they called an "educational campaign." Speaking at numerous rallies throughout the state, John L. Lewis, international president of the United Mine Workers of America, and John H. Walker, president of District No. 12, urged the men to accept the agreement and return to work.

After the casting of ballots on August 6, each local union sent tally sheets of its election returns to the District No. 12 headquarters in Springfield, where an official tabulation was to be made. A study of news reports sent out during the early tabulation indicates that the vote was negative. The tally sheets were kept in the vault of the Ridgely Farmers' State Bank at night. On the morning of August 10, as the two tellers were bringing the

return sheets from the bank to the United Mine Workers headquarters for a final tabulation, the sheets mysteriously disappeared.

Two conflicting stories explained the loss of the tally sheets. Orlie Blackman and George E. Gee, the tellers, contended that in order to avoid a crowd of miners stationed in front of the district headquarters building, they had walked through an alley, the former carrying the package which contained the return sheets. Two men approached from an intersection. One of them, with his hand in his pocket, pressed something hard against Blackman's side and demanded that the package be handed over. The teller complied, believing the robbers armed. The bandits fled down the alley and escaped in an automobile. Another version was given by Henry Bertoni, of Buckner, Illinois, who had been elected by the miners to serve as their official "watcher" or observer to see that the returns were tabulated correctly. On the same day Bertoni swore an affidavit in which he said that he had seen Blackman and Gee come from the bank and walk down the street. He further claimed that Fox Hughes, vice-president of District No. 12, drove past him in his automobile, stopped near the tellers, and after Blackman had dropped the package into the car, drove away.

District officials, when notified of the "hold-up," declared that it would have no effect on the referendum other than to delay the final announcement of the vote. They explained that the ballots cast in the referendum and duplicate return sheets were still on file in the various local unions and that copies could be obtained within twenty-four hours. Instead of the officials requesting that new sets of return sheets be sent, however, a meeting was held that afternoon. Immediately afterwards, John L. Lewis announced that a state of emergency had been created, and since officers were of the conclusive opinion that the agreement had been ratified by a majority of the membership, a new agreement had been executed.

Since an official report of the second referendum was not issued, it has been necessary to use another method in trying to determine the results. Leading newspapers in each sub-district compiled and printed summaries of the vote, as telephoned by local union secretaries, several days before the results of the vote were announced. Using news papers from representative

cities scattered throughout downstate Illinois, we find:

District	*For*	*Against*
West Frankfort	3,153	5,029
Danville	981	929
Taylorville	1,412	1,405
Springfield	1,296	6,164
Centralia	429	142
Belleville	212	604
Totals	7,483	14,273

Though incomplete, these figures make it questionable whether the U. M. W. of A. officials could correctly state that the agreemen had been ratified by a majority of the membership, declare a state of emergency, and sign a contract with the operators.

Rallying their forces, the opposition first turned to Christian County where the Peabody Coal Company was operating four of its largest mines. Although company and county officials at first objected to outside forces entering the area, they soon agreed to permit "peaceful picketing." Thereupon, protesting United Mine Workers moved into the area and within two days, having successfully and peacefully picketed the mines, they withdrew their forces.

Inspired by their victory, the group turned to southern Illinois, where several mines, particularly in Franklin County, were operating. On August 24, 1932, a caravan of approximately eight hundred automobiles, filled with miners, moved southward. Halted several times, they finally reached the junction of U. S. Highway No. 51 and Illinois Highway No. 14, where the head of the column was turned into Franklin County. As they moved across Little Muddy River, the boundary between Perry and Franklin counties, and up a long hill, they were stopped by Sheriff Browning Robinson and his special deputies. Cars were jammed when the men attempted to turn around; guns were fired; and clubs and baseball bats landed on the heads of the protesting group. One shudders at the thought of what might have happened had the members of the caravan been armed. Undoubtedly, they had come to picket peacefully. Following this "Battle of Mulkeytown," the dissenting miners, still members of the United Mine Workers of America, abandoned plans for a

second invasion of Franklin County.

On September 1, 1932, almost three hundred delegates convened at Benld, Illinois, and launched the Progressive Miners of America. Comparisons and contrasts of the constitution of the old union with that of its offspring deal largely with provisions which would prevent the recurrence of another Springfield "holdup" by keeping control within the hands of the rank and file. To prevent one man from getting too much control, as the Progressives contended that Lewis had done, a special article limited an officer's term in the same position to two years. It was possible for him to serve a second successive term in another office, but four years was the maximum length of continuous service. One regained eligibility for re-election by returning to some active work in or around the mine for a period of at least two years. Such a system, they hoped, would keep the miners' officers in touch with the men whom they represented.

A significant part has been taken by the Women's Auxiliary of the Progressive Miners of America. Composed of mothers wives, and sisters of Progressive miners, the members of the organization not only fed the miners while they were picketing but also appeared in the lines with the men.

Claiming a large majority of the mine-workers in Illinois, the Progressives have sought recognition. In vain they requested Governor Horner to conduct a referendum to determine which organization the men preferred. They strove for recognition through the federal government under Section 7(a) of House Bill No. 5755, better known as the National Industrial Recovery Act. Again they failed. They carried their case to a court of law, but the court insisted that it was without jurisdiction. When they finally persuaded the National Labor Relations Board to conduct a referendum in the disputed Mine B Coal Company case, they won the referendum and were declared the legal agent. Thereupon, the company refused to abide by the decision and closed its mine, indicating that the N. L. R. B. had power to render decisions but lacked the means to enforce them.

Expensive litigation has kept the reserve fund of the union fairly small. Personal damage suits, injunctions, and loss-of-profits cases have found the union in court almost constantly. In addition, the bombings which created a small reign of terror in Illinois have hurt the union. Railroads, bridges, houses, and

mines have suffered from blasts "due to inter-union rivalry." A federal investigation finally resulted in the trial and conviction of thirty-six men, most of them Progressive miners. As a result of the destruction of railroads, they were convicted for interfering with the United States mails and interstate commerce. For the bombings of houses no one has been convicted as yet.

Some recognition has been given the union since its affiliation with the American Federation of Labor in June, 1937. When a charter was issued in April, 1938, it became an international body known as the Progressive Mine Workers of America. Through its international president, Joe Ozanic, it was the first organization to give testimony before the special committee established by the House of Representatives to investigate the activities of the National Labor Relations Board. Ozanic presented evidence showing that, principally because of inaction, the labor board had prevented the expansion of the union into other districts.

Almost from the beginning there has been jealousy and rivalry within the organization. Officers have attempted to pacify a pro-U. M. W. of A. element while at the same time trying to keep control of the group which demanded drastic action, if necessary, to accomplish its ends. It is only natural that the opposition has taken advantage of this small division within the ranks.

Certainly from the point of view of the workers, two organizations in one trade are worse than none. Whether the miners will continue to fight among themselves more than they fight the operators remains to be seen.

VITA

Dallas M Young was born on January 15, 1914, in Christopher, Illinois, the son of Mr. and Mrs. Arvel E. Young. His primary and secondary school education was obtained at Valier, Illinois. He received his Bachelor of Education degree from Southern Illinois State Normal University in June, 1936. Entering the University of Illinois the following fall, he received a graduate assistantship in history, which he has held until the present time. Meanwhile, in August, 1937, the Master of Arts degree was conferred upon him. He is a member of Kappa Phi Kappa. In August, 1939, he was married to Christina R. Easton.